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## ***Evangelii Gaudium* and the Prospects for Ecumenical Mission**

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### **Abstract**

*Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) is addressed to the “bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful” of the Catholic Church. It comes out of an internal discussion of “the new evangelization” and devotes considerable space to particular concerns of the Catholic Church such as its pastoral activity, preaching ministry and devotion to Mary. Out of 288 sections it devotes only three near the end to “ecumenical dialogue”. So it would not seem at first sight to offer much prospect for ecumenical mission. However, this impression is deceptive. This article compares EG with the main concerns of the World Council of Churches’ statement on mission and evangelism in changing landscapes, *Together towards Life* (TTL), which was published earlier the same year, and finds a remarkable extent of common ground. It also finds that both documents share an inclusive and holistic understanding of mission/evangelization.

### **Bio**

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*Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) is addressed to the “bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful” of the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> It comes out of an internal discussion of “the new evangelization”<sup>2</sup> and devotes considerable space to particular concerns of the Catholic Church such as its pastoral activity, preaching ministry and devotion to Mary. Out of 288 sections it devotes only three near the end to “ecumenical dialogue” (244-46). So it would not seem at first sight to offer much prospect for ecumenical mission. However, this impression is deceptive, first, because of the extent of common ground between EG and the World Council of Churches’ statement on mission and evangelism in changing landscapes, *Together towards Life* (TTL),<sup>3</sup> which was published earlier the same year, and second, because of its inclusive and holistic understanding of evangelization.

I shall argue that EG shares the four-fold mission agenda of TTL, as expressed in its four main sections on practising the life-giving mission of the Spirit, including the marginalized, creating a missionary church, and proclaiming the Gospel authentically. In each case I shall point to ways in which the confluence of EG with TTL gives ground for ecumenical mission.

### **Practising the life-giving mission of the Spirit**

TTL has a distinctive pneumatological framework. Each of its main sections is titled with a characteristic of the Holy Spirit: Spirit of mission, Spirit of liberation, Spirit of community, and Spirit of Pentecost. Moreover, the 'life' which is the focus of the title of the document is made synonymous with the presence and action of the Spirit. Although not quite so prominent a theme, EG is similarly infused with pneumatology. The Spirit animates ministry (15), impels evangelization (119, 130), guides the evangelizer (14, 139, 119) and nourishes the missionary disciple (50, 280). In EG, the Holy Spirit is principal agent of evangelization (122), sowing Christian values in society (68), enriching culture (116), penetrating every human situation and all social bonds (178) and bringing about liberation (178, cf. 197). The Spirit in freedom (279) goes ahead of evangelization, liberating and enlightening non-Christians (254, 265), directing people toward the Church (47), blazing new trails (105) and enabling the response to the gospel (112). As the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit is the source of the grace that gives hope (84) and confidence (145, 280) and frees us from our self-centredness to evangelize (97). The Spirit raises up communities of evangelism (29), is manifested in 'works of love' (37) and mobilizes the 'loving attentiveness' that enables the seeking of the other's good (199). The Spirit is the both the source of diversity and also brings about unity (131, 230) by reconciling different parts of the Church (40, cf. 246) and building harmony between cultures (117). The mission pneumatology of EG comes to a climax in its last chapter in which the spirit of the new evangelization is likened to the Spirit of Pentecost and Mary is described as its supreme exemplar. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is the source of the joy which is the means by, and the medium in which, the gospel is proclaimed (5, 141). In a similar way to which TTL describes mission as 'joining in with the Spirit' (18, 25, 110), the pope envisages the Church as 'inserting ourselves into the divine initiative' (EG 112) and being led by the Spirit in evangelization (12, 119) just as Jesus was (21). As in TTL, a pre-requisite for this is discernment of 'the paths of the Spirit' (EG 48) and choosing between good and evil spirits (51), discernment being a major theme of the exhortation.

Just as TTL characterises the Spirit as the giver of life – that is the abundant life promised by Jesus Christ (John 10.10) and exemplified in him (1; cf. 112) – the aim of EG is also the life of the Spirit of Christ (2). However, whereas in EG 'life' refers almost exclusively to the dignified and fulfilled human life (see especially 75, where John 10.10 is also cited), in TTL 'life' refers to all created life and mission supports whatever is life-affirming and challenges the life-denying (e.g. 2, 102). However, EG does not extend the

work of the Holy Spirit beyond human beings to the whole cosmos in the way that TTL does. The publication by Pope Francis of the encyclical *Laudato Si* in 2015, which deals with environmental issues, shows, if there were any doubt, that the Catholic Church is also concerned for life in its biological and ecological senses.<sup>4</sup> Although this is not expressed pneumatologically but in terms of a theology of creation, both EG and LS share the mission agenda of TTL to protect life, as we shall see below. Furthermore, belief in 'the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit', who has sown gifts in other Christians, is the basis of the ecumenical learning which will lead us together toward truth and goodness (246).

In EG the chief locus of the Spirit's work beyond the church is in cultures and here there is a shared vision of mission as transformative of cultures. EG is positive about culture, multiple cultures are recognised and culture is defined as that which 'embraces the totality of a people's life' (115). TTL similarly affirms the world as multi-cultural (9). It discusses 'intercultural engagement' positively (70), referring to receiving 'life-giving wisdoms' from different cultures (TTL 27) and to 'cultural difference as a gift of the Spirit' (75). The need of cultures to be transformed by the Holy Spirit is a major theme of TTL (2-3, 30, 37, 40, 49-50, 91, 100, 108). Francis likewise stresses that evangelization is inculturation of the faith (122) by which communities are enriched 'with the transforming power of the Gospel' (116). Evangelizers should aim to 'embed' the gospel in each culture through socialization and education (129; cf. 68-69) and theological 'dialogue' with its 'sciences and human experiences' (133). And the Pope is hopeful because culture is not self-determining but is 'a dynamic reality which a people constantly recreates' (EG 122).

Whereas EG is optimistic about culture, TTL divides cultures into those that are 'life-affirming' and those that are not. It seeks to work with the former (27, 110) but takes a counter-cultural, confrontational approach to the latter (37, 49, 108). These colonial or neo-colonial cultures which are accused of generating and sustaining 'massive poverty, discrimination, and dehumanization, and which exploit or destroy people and the earth' (37). As such the predominant approach is to be suspicious of all cultures as potentially harmful to human flourishing. So TTL overlays the multi-cultural model with an ideological distinction between the market or mammon on the one hand, which is culturally hegemonic (98), and the Spirit of Life on the other, which is liberating. Although he refers similarly to a destructive 'prevailing culture' brought about by globalization (62; cf. also 53, 54, 79), Francis acclaims some cultures as 'evangelized' because they show a 'Christian substratum' especially in the realm of values (EG 68). Francis emphasises that 'realities are greater than ideas' and puts ideology aside in favour of practice (233). Although the faith must be inculturated, there are 'objective moral norms which are valid for everyone' (64). One of these is 'the option for the poor' which, being primarily a theological category (198), is a universal obligation that transcends local concerns.

## Including the marginalized

EG shares the concern for the marginalized to which the second main section of TTL is devoted. EG refers to the marginalized (53, 60) and also to the peripheries (20) but most often to exclusion and the excluded (52-61, 69, 74, 98, 113, 131, 202, 212, 218-19). TTL examines power relations more generally to take account of race, caste and community, whereas EG refers frequently and throughout to the poor as the main category of the excluded (186-216), but in both documents economic marginalization is to the fore. Both prophetically condemn market ideology, consumerism and indebtedness as the chief evils of our day (EG 53-60, 69, 202, 204; TTL 7, 30-31, 108). The Pope's call for an inclusive economy (53-54) and an ethical approach to economics (202-208) would not be out of place in TTL.

In EG, Francis makes evangelization into 'good news to the poor' (197) bringing 'human advancement' (178), the kingdom of God (180), 'a better world' (183). He insists that the poor are part of human society and should be treated as neighbours (186, 204). Beyond organising for the poor, the Pope commends 'loving attentiveness' and accompaniment on the 'path of liberation' (199). Furthermore, Francis completes the action-reflection hermeneutical circle by asserting that the poor themselves are agents of evangelization (198). TTL highlights this final realization that mission may be '*from the margins*' (36-54). In this perspective, the aim of mission is 'not simply to move people from the margins to centres of power' but to include everyone (46-49). Both TTL and EG agree that this involves transforming power structures and mechanisms to promote the common good (TTL 33, 37, 40, 50, 96, 106; EG 59-60, 188-89, 202, 218) and recognising the dignity of all human persons (TTL 38, 42, 45, 88, 96; EG 51-52, 75, 202-16). This agenda is summed up in their common call for justice and peace (e.g. EG 217-21; TTL 6-9).

In both statements, the inclusion of the marginalized requires a reconfiguration of the church, particularly in view of the global nature of Christianity. Pope Francis complains that some ecclesial structures are a hindrance to evangelization (26-27) and he pursues an agenda of de-centralization by which 'each particular Church' under a bishop is the 'primary subject of evangelization' (30). As part of this, the Pope relativizes his own position, describing himself as bishop of Rome (only) and refusing to pronounce on topics that are within the competence and jurisdiction of the local church (32, 184). This has the effect of internationalizing the Church. The Pope states his intention to realise the potential of the episcopal conferences (32) and gives them authority including references to the statements of bishops from different parts of the world (e.g. 25, 110, 118, 191, 230). He stresses that it is the whole church 'throughout the world' (25) which is 'going forth' in mission (20) and rejects any European cultural imperialism (117-18). His desire to include the margins is also shown by way he chooses issues about which the church outside the West feels strongly, such as economic injustice and environmental degradation.

In TTL a similar concern to include the whole church is represented by use of 'world Christianity' as a category of analysis (5, 111) and by attention to economic and environmental issues under the banner of 'life'. TTL recognises strong Christian movements emerging from outside the West (5). It affirms non-Western forms of Christianity; many are Pentecostal movements to which it reaches out by its use of pneumatology. An additional category in TTL, and briefly referred to in EG (210), is migration, which is seen to be 'reshaping the Christian landscape' (TTL 5, 70). In contrast to the settled churches of European tradition organised within national borders and into parishes, TTL envisages churches without or across borders and increasingly 'on the move' (TTL title above 55). Considering that in the book of Acts, evangelization is accomplished through the scattering of Christians as well as by missionary movements, in the present context of global migration there is room for further common reflection on migration and mission.

The Catholic Church is one church throughout the world – a 'Church without frontiers' (EG 210). Pope Francis recognises different expressions of community and spirituality within the one Church: 'basic communities and small communities, movements' (29); expressions of popular piety (124) and the exercise of various charisms (130). Rather than being causes of heresy or schism, they are drawn closer into the people of God and through the Holy Spirit are said to adorn and pour out treasures on the Church in mission (116-117). The WCC, conversely, represents multiple churches striving for unity. Nevertheless, TTL also strives for greater inclusivity by the expanded ecclesial categories it uses: 'Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Indigenous churches' (65). Moreover, the unity and 'common witness' (TTL 63) calls for is increasingly across regional rather than denominational boundaries. In other words, 'ecumenical' is used more in its meaning as applied to the early church councils: the churches from around the world. TTL recognises that any local church may be shaped as much by its 'geo-political and socio-economic context' (78) or 'ethnic and cultural' composition (70) as by its denominational identity (if it has one). Together with EG's decentralization, this would seem to open the possibility for deeper local expressions of ecumenism involving Catholics.

TTL and EG draw attention to catholicity as cultural diversity. Both statements speak positively about diversity as something that comes from the Holy Spirit (EG 131; TTL 66) and both call for charisms, especially arising from cultural diversity, to be recognised and also integrated into the Church for the sake of mission (EG 131; TTL 27). Francis argues that 'cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity' but rather, the Holy Spirit creates 'a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony'. TTL, which also frequently refers to charisms (as 'gifts') joins his plea to receive from one another '[t]hrough an exchange of gifts' so that 'the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness' (EG 246; e.g. TTL 63).

## Creating a missionary church

Both documents stress the inherently missionary and evangelizing nature of the church (TTL 55-58; EG 20-23). All areas of church life are 'missional' (TTL 10) and 'missionary outreach' is 'paradigmatic for all the Church's activity', including pastoral ministry (EG 15). For this to be realised, they put forward necessary structural and attitudinal changes. The statements each devote space to the structures of the missionary church (EG 26-27; TTL 67-79). Much of EG is devoted to the evangelization of the Church within in order to be 'suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation' (27). Francis envisages 'a Church whose doors are open' and that is engaged with the world, even if that means it is 'bruised, hurting and dirty' (46, 49). In TTL, the existence of the church is said to be 'for the sake of mission' (57). Since CWME does not have a mandate to consider aspects of church life that are the concern of other commissions, in TTL, the renewal of the church for mission is primarily in terms of rediscovering its unity in diversity as well as its communal nature and its inclusivity. Like EG, it envisages a 'multicultural church' (TTL 75)—'a people of many faces' (EG 117).

Both statements agree that a missionary 'impulse' is integral to the Christian life because it is a response to the love of God (EG 262-63; TTL 55-56). Therefore all Christians and the 'entire people of God' (EG 111) are evangelizers or missionaries, or 'missionary disciples' in the phraseology of EG. Both documents therefore consider the qualities necessary for those carrying out mission or evangelization. EG discusses the need for pastoral workers to overcome various temptations (EG 76-109) and for evangelization to arise from a personal encounter with Christ (EG 264-67). TTL calls for 'authentic' witness and evangelism (TTL 86-92).

For EG and TTL, mission/evangelization is the way of Christ (EG 21; TTL 88) and so they enjoin a missionary, or mission, spirituality (EG 78-80, 102-106; TTL 30-33). According to EG, '[i]n virtue of their baptism' (120) the laity and the whole church is empowered to become 'Spirit-filled evangelizers' (259), guided the Holy Spirit (261) and the example of Jesus (264-67), encouraged by sharing in the life of the people of God (268-74), drawing strength from the power of Christ's resurrection (275-81), from the life of prayer (281-83) and from following the example of Mary (284-88). In TTL, mindful of colonial mission (27, 98), the emphasis is more on self-emptying than empowerment, and on vulnerability and humility in evangelizing (e.g. 8, 23, 33, 62, 71, 87, 89, 92, 106).

In his connection of mission with spirituality, Pope Francis brings together 'priests, religious and laity' (169) in a theology of 'personal accompaniment' for growth. In particular, as the Jesuit Pope applies Ignatian spirituality to the work of evangelization, he brings the life of that missionary community into the heart of the life of the Church. He develops a contemporary mission spirituality as he advises preachers, catechists and evangelizers to trust in the Holy Spirit and cultivate Spirit-filled lives (EG 259-288). In



TTL, mission spirituality is linked to the document's pneumatological framework. Its development is against a background of the association of mission with activism, and even violence, and of spirituality with quietism. CWME explicitly rejects violence as a means of mission (cf. TTL 47, 77, 90, 92). In paying attention to the means and processes of mission rather than only to its end result, the development of mission spirituality is also a way of emphasising the need for an ethical approach in mission and evangelism (TTL 29). TTL puts forward a 'transformative spirituality' in the sense that it energises and promotes life (3, 29-30). Transformative spirituality is not individualistic but communal and for the sake of the whole creation (21, 30). It involves self-sacrifice, kenosis, solidarity and accompaniment (32-35).

### **Proclaiming the gospel authentically**

Both documents give attention to proclamation. TTL treats this under 'evangelism', which is defined as 'mission activity which makes explicit and unambiguous the centrality of the incarnation, suffering, and resurrection of Jesus Christ' (80) and it includes an 'invitation to personal conversion to a new life in Christ' (85). The main concern of TTL is that evangelism should be 'authentic'; that is it is according to way of Jesus in the gospels (86-92); it is dialogical and affirms diversity (93-100); and it is holistic: 'the communication of the whole gospel to the whole of humanity in the whole world' (80). It is concerned on the one hand to reign in proselytisers, whose activities threaten community cohesion in various parts of the world, and on the other to endorse and combine prophetic witness with the example of a life of faith.

Chapter 3 of EG is devoted to proclamation. Francis echoes TTL (consciously or not) when he declares that 'the entire people of God proclaims the gospel' (111, 119-21) 'for everyone' (112-114) in all cultures (115-118) and when he inserts 'the social dimension'. He stresses that each baptised person has a responsibility to evangelise (119-121) and that popular piety is a means of evangelization (122-126). However, in his consideration of proclamation, he highlights the more professional activities of preaching and the homily (135-159) and catechesis (163-68). EG uses 'conversion' only with reference to the church and does not discuss the challenges to witness in multi-religious contexts, which are the focus of TTL statements on evangelism.<sup>5</sup> The guidelines already prepared by the WCC and the RCC on ethical witness in multi-religious contexts, to which TTL refers,<sup>6</sup> could be fruitfully applied for ecumenical mission in these and other contexts as well.

The relative meanings of 'mission', 'evangelism' and 'evangelization' have been the subject of much discussion. Here, whereas TTL uses 'evangelism' in a narrow sense, EG uses 'evangelization' interchangeably with 'mission'. TTL does not use 'evangelization' at all except with reference to other bodies, but it does refer to 'the call to evangelize' (81, 85). 'Evangelization' was the preferred term in Protestant circles a century ago.<sup>7</sup> In dialogue around EG, it would be worth the WCC to consider reviving 'evangelization' as



a synonym for 'mission and evangelism'. There are two main reasons for this: first, because 'mission and evangelism' tends to separate what are integral, and second, because in an era where every organisation has a mission, by its etymology 'evangelization' draws attention to the specifically Christian mission of 'good news'.

## Prospects for Ecumenical Mission

Both EG and TTL appeal 'to all Christians everywhere' (EG 3; cf. TTL 8). Since TTL was in process from 2008 and involved Vatican representatives and other Catholics, the drafters of EG may have been aware of it, but there is no evidence of any direct dependence. The striking convergences could equally result from more general global conversation between mission theologians of the two bodies for which there is ample opportunity. The extent of confluence of the two documents raises good prospects for ecumenical mission, in particular, through development of mission pneumatology; through a renewed understanding of catholicity as intercultural and ecumenism as international; through the development of mission spirituality and the ethics of mission; and through attention to authentic proclamation and rethinking the terminology of mission/evangelization.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Francis I, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel* (Holy See: Vatican Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Grogan & Kirsteen Kim (eds), *The New Evangelization: Faith, People, Context and Practice* (London: T&T Clark, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> World Council of Churches, *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Francis I, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Holy See: Vatican Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Approaches to other faiths are treated in the short section on dialogue (EG 247-54).

<sup>6</sup> World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and World Evangelical Alliance, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct* (2011). Available from the respective websites.

<sup>7</sup> For example, 'the evangelization of the world in this generation' was the watchword of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions and the title of a book by John R. Mott, chairman of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910.